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ABSTRACT

The development of the Greek system on college campuses as brought about an evolution of a unique student culture within higher education. Most of the research on the Greek experience does not acknowledge the presence of Black fraternities and sororities although these organizations have over 90 years experience on campuses. This paper describes the Black Greek culture with emphasis on the membership intake process and offers a contextualization of the problems using student development theory to offer reasonable strategies for salvaging this aspect of college life. Since the major object of these groups is to uplift the race, student affairs professionals should assist Greek organizations in designing rites of passage that affirm rather than demean the ethnic identity of potential members. This means reversing some of the patterns of neglect and the laissez-faire attitude that some may hold because they are not comfortable with the Black Greek culture or do not fully understand its workings. This new level of attention means actively using theory in advising the chapters. By actively engaging these students, higher education may be able to create a new, healthier culture that supports student development, active learning, and community building. (Contains 30 references.) (JDM)

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The Persistent Pledging of Black Greeks:

A Student Development Approach for Understanding and Challenging the Culture

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The college fraternity has been an integral part of the co-curricular experience in American higher education for over 200 years. The movement began with the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 as a secret society and expanded to a general or social fraternity movement in the early 1800s and to a sorority movement in the mid 1800s (Anson and Marchesani, Jr. 1991). Greek life has affected countless college students, in both positive and negative ways.

With the development of the Greek system, we have witnessed the evolution of a unique student culture within our colleges and universities. The organizations recruit members through a program known as rush, where the next generation of brothers and sisters are selected. In a rite of passage known as pledging, potential members complete an educational program, laden with frivolous and sometimes dangerous sophomoric antics, before gaining the full benefits of membership. The Greeks developed their own week, a system of intramural competition, "neighborhoods" where large chapter houses reside on a row, and governing bodies that represent and/or dictate the Greeks' interests to the rest of the campus community.

This is the culture of Greek life that has become common in higher education. Much of the literature on Greek life focuses largely on cultural artifacts of the Greek system that pose challenges to the educational mission of our institutions: deteriorating houses, alcohol abuse and binge drinking, hazing, and rivalries which may manifest themselves in destructive behaviors (Kuh and Lyons 1992; Kuh, Pascarella, and Wechsler 1996; Maisel 1990). Whipple and Sullivan (1998) note that the Greek culture is powerful, with serious implications for student learning. However, the authors clearly state, with reference to addressing and remedying the ills of the Greek system and moving toward learning communities:

> *Greek letter organizations can only become communities of learners if the students themselves want to create such communities. They will need help. College and university administrators can aid in this endeavor by providing organizational, educational, and financial resources, as well as moral support. (P. 12)*

Yet the entire Greek culture cannot be easily deciphered or defined with a vocabulary that includes the terms quota and bid day. The constantly neglected aspect of Greek life involves the historically Black fraternities and sororities. While these organizations have over 90 years of existence on campuses, their culture is still foreign to the vast majority. Most of the research on the Greek experience either minimizes or does not acknowledge these groups' presence or existence. Even recent works (Whipple 1998) which seek to provide comprehensive information to improve the Greek experience file disclaimers indicating:

> *In general, historically black and predominantly white Greek groups differ in organization, membership, and traditions.... thus, although we intend to provide information that is not exclusive to white Greek organizations, and although we hope the challenges discussed in this volume are of interest to historically black Greek groups, most of the work on which this volume is based relates to predominantly white groups. (P. 3)*

So while higher education works to address the problems of the majority Greek culture, this minority culture, which has further influenced the development of Latin fraternities and sororities more directly, and Asian fraternities and sororities to a lesser extent, is experiencing its own crisis. This crisis also revolves around the recruitment, selection, and education of new members. While the terminology suggests a process called membership intake, the core value of pledging threatens the existence of these groups on the collegiate level in their present forms. This paper describes the Black Greek culture with emphasis on the membership intake process and offers a contextualization of the problems using student development theory, suggesting tools to fairly address the issues for this segment of the Greek community.

The Black Greek Culture of Pledging

As indicated, the presence of Black fraternal organizations in higher education dates to the first decade of the twentieth century. The first college-based fraternal organization formed to meet the unique needs of Black students was Alpha Kappa Nu; it was formed in 1903 at Indi-

ana University but lasted only about 14 months (Crump 1983). However, since 1903 more than 50 Black fraternal organizations have existed (Kimbrough 1998), although only nine now remain. The oldest still-functioning Black Greek-letter organization is Sigma Pi Phi fraternity, founded in 1904; however, its current membership includes only men who have already graduated from college. The earliest college-based fraternity that is still going is Alpha Phi Alpha, formed at Cornell in 1906 (Wesley 1961); Alpha Phi Alpha originated as a literary society, as did other fraternities at Cornell (Bishop 1962). Seven other Black Greek organizations which still exist were founded between 1906 and 1922; they are Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908), Kappa Alpha Psi (1911), Omega Psi Phi (1911), Delta Sigma Theta (1913), Phi Beta Sigma (1914), Zeta Phi Beta (1920), and Sigma Gamma Rho sorority, founded in 1922. Five of these seven are at Howard University alone. The ninth and latest major Black Greek-letter organization to be formed and still in existence is the Iota Phi Theta fraternity, founded at Morgan State University in 1963 and inducted into the National Pan-Hellenic Council in 1996 (Personal communication from the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc., national headquarters, November 22, 1996).

So while higher education works to address the problems of the majority Greek culture, this minority culture, which has further influenced the development of Latin fraternities and sororities more directly, and Asian fraternities and sororities to a lesser extent, is experiencing its own crisis. This crisis also revolves around the recruitment, selection, and education of new members.

With the development of historically Black fraternal organizations, a new Greek life culture emerged. Schein (1992) defines culture as:

> *A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (P. 12)*

Schein indicates that this definition reveals, among other items, problems associated with socialization and behavior. This definition, then, accurately describes the situation faced in higher education by those who would change the Greek culture.

Culture must be analyzed by levels or according to the degree to which the culture is visible to observers (Schein 1992). On the most basic level, the artifacts include the visible products of a group. For White Greeks, these include stately houses and rush songs. With Black Greeks, there are numerous artifacts. Some are in the form of paraphernalia, such as jackets and jerseys with letters. Others are in the form of audible calls of acknowledgment or hand signs. Stepping, the artifact of expression which involves choreographed hand and foot movements, is probably the most visible yet noncontroversial aspect of this culture (Nomani 1989).

From approximately 1920 to 1990, pledging could be described as the definitive cultural artifact of the Black Greek experience (Kimbrough 1997). This process evolved so that it came to be recognized by pledges walking together in a single file line, dressed alike, and performing all their daily activities together, in unison. The manifested pledge process visually expressed the deepest layer of this culture, basic underlying assumptions, which represent the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, and perceptions (Schein 1992). In fact, Schein indicates that basic assumptions "tend to be those we neither confront nor debate and hence are extremely difficult to change." (P. 22)

This understanding of culture fully explains the present crisis facing Black fraternities and sororities. With the increased media attention to the activities of these organizations, particularly in the 1980s, national organizations began to reassess the pledge process (Copeland 1988). After the death of a Morehouse College student (Usdansky 1989), the leaders of the eight largest Black fraternal organizations moved decidedly to end pledging (Collison 1990; Marriot 1990). The artifacts of this aspect of

the culture— lining up, line names and numbers, dressing alike— were to end.

But this action did not challenge or redirect the basic underlying assumptions, which for undergraduates in particular were and continue to be very prevalent. These underlying assumptions place a premium on the pledge experience. In order to be considered a legitimate or "real" member, persons must endure a pledge process, which is now described as underground pledging, pre-pledging, post-pledging, or a combination of the three (Kimbrough 1997; Reese 1993; Williams 1992). The underlying assumption is that prospective members must earn their way into the organization beyond meeting the paper qualifications. Students believe that if they do not partake in some sort of experience to prove themselves, to essentially pass the test of pledging, they will be subject to various forms of ostracism, from public ridicule and harassment to physical confrontations.

Since a major tenet of these organizations is to uplift the race (McKenzie 1990), student affairs professionals should assist organizational leaders in designing rites of passages that affirm rather than demean the ethnic identity of potential members.

This underlying assumption is communicated through the second layer of culture as defined by Schein (1992), the espoused values. Espoused values are strategies, goals, or philosophies communicated by the group as justification. Schein comments that values that can be validated either physically or socially become core assumptions. For a period of almost 70 years, pledging for Black Greeks provided this validation, both physically and socially. Despite organizational efforts to eradicate the artifacts of this culture of pledging, the espoused values and the basic underlying assumptions have yet to be effectively challenged (Ruffins 1997). Hence, the continued incidences of hazing within these organizations.

Williams (1992) provided strong evidence that the administrative changes in the pledge process failed to affect the middle and lowest levels of culture. In surveying numerous undergraduate leaders of these organizations to ascertain their perceptions of the no-pledge intake process, Williams provided strong evidence that predicted the crisis at hand. Students clearly stated that they believed the new program would cause less of a commitment to their organizations, bonding opportunities would be lost, there would not be enough time to teach history, and the new process would not end hazing.

One of the themes that emerged through Williams' study (1992) was that the issue of gaining respect was important enough for undergraduates to risk sanctions in order to conduct an underground pledge process. Culturally speaking, Williams indicated "underground pledge activities, and the concept of achieving respect by enduring hazing are real values espoused by students in this study." (P. 107) Recent, high profile hazing incidents (Argetsinger 1998; Chura 1998; Hurla 1998) have again created a new sense of urgency to address the behaviors and, ultimately, to achieve a better understanding of the Black Greek culture (Ruffins1998).

A Student Development Cultural Change Strategy

Student development theories have provided a framework for understanding how students develop. While the perspective of identity or moral development has been from the majority culture's perspective, recent theories, such as Cross's Nigrescence theory, provides a comprehensive insight into African American identity development. Although student affairs practitioners have utilized various theories to design policies and programs, the application of such theories in modifying certain student behaviors such as hazing among Greek-letter organizations is marginal.

Despite the enforcement of institutional policies and legislation against hazing, incidents still occur, suggesting that the problem is a systemic one. Since the majority of Black Greek-letter organizations reflect a philosophy that encourages service to the African American community, the implementation of theories that are

Afro-Centric in nature may help in the reduction of these negative behaviors. The Africentric Resistance Model is one such theory that affirms rather than demeans the cultural identity of individuals.

Since a major tenet of these organizations is to uplift the race (McKenzie 1990), student affairs professionals should assist organizational leaders in designing rites of passages that affirm rather than demean the ethnic identity of potential members. For example, as a requirement for membership, members could require aspirants to sponsor campus-wide educational programs during Black History Month and Kwanza. Even social activities such as Greek shows and dances could have a philanthropic emphasis reinforcing the organization's commitment of service to the African American community. In time, the consistent promotion of cultural and social activities that validate members' cultural heritage will refute previous debilitating initiation practices such as hazing that detract from one's culture (Robinson and Ward 1991).

An additional strategy that may discourage hazing is the modification of organizational values. Although institutional policies and legislation have had some success in reducing incidents, they have not been totally effective in altering this particular organizational value. Since organizational culture is shaped by members sharing similar values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions, the familial nucleus within fraternities and sororities ensures that certain values such as hazing remain (Jakobsen 1986).

To modify those values that may be detrimental to the survival of the organization, Reese (1993) suggests that student affairs professionals, along with organizational faculty, assist leaders of Greek organizations in reclarifying their goals in conjunction with their respective missions. Student affairs professionals who participate in collaborative relationships with members of the faculty reinforce the construct that student learning does not occur in isolation but across institutional boundaries.

Finally, providing leadership training for organizational officers that is contemporary rather than conventional may yield promising results in the battle against hazing. Recently, the Director of Area Five of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity facilitated an undergraduate leadership training workshop that utilized student development theories as the primary component of strengthening leadership skills (R.E. Johnson, personal communication, August 24, 1998). After being introduced to developmental theories emphasizing identity and moral development, participants were challenged to resolve fraternal predicaments such as hazing using moral dilemma discussions. This format is quite useful in enhancing the moral and ethical reasoning of students.

The participants indicated that this method of leadership training enhanced their problem solving skills while helping them understand the behaviors and attitudes of their members. Assessment of this training method could be accomplished by administering a pre/post test at the beginning and conclusion of the academic year. Participants should have gained the ability to understand the dynamics of leadership, including but not limited to power, forming action plans, empowering others, providing feedback, and causing and responding to change. In addition, leaders should have a better understanding of their own leadership styles and communication patterns. If campuses are to be successful in totally eradicating hazing, punitive measures such as institutional policies and legislation alone may not be totally sufficient. However, the use of theory in leadership training as well as the design of nonviolent rites of passage may result in the change of adverse values such as hazing. Failure to apply such techniques may result in the demise of these vital student organizations.

Summary

This article notes the destructive behaviors associated with the culture of Black Greek pledging but also offers reasonable strategies for salvaging this aspect of the collegiate fraternal experience. While few studies list the tangible benefits of membership, there is evidence that these organizations provide experiential leadership training and other worthwhile experiences not available to nonmembers (Kimbrough 1996). Furthermore, a review of many stories written about these organizations highlights the famous and influential alumni, most of whom entered their organizations through the colle-

giate ranks (e.g., Freeman and Witcher 1988).

The use of student development theory in tackling the culture of Greek pledging and hazing can be one approach to redirecting the culture. In fact, this approach should also be considered when addressing many of the ills plaguing the Greek system. As summarized in this article, the challenges facing historically Black Greeks are in need of serious attention by student affairs administrators. This means reversing some of the patterns of neglect and a laissez-faire attitude that some may hold because they are not comfortable with the Black Greek culture or do not fully understand its workings. This new level of attention means actively using theory in advising the chapters and the local NPHC, as well as creating educational programming opportunities that will challenge the culture. Finally, partnerships with local graduate chapters and the graduate NPHC could strengthen efforts to change the culture of pledging. This alliance can be useful not only in creating development-centered programming activities, but as a way to monitor the activities which perpetuate the culture of pledging. By actively engaging these students, higher education may be able to create a new, healthier culture that supports student development, active learning, and community building.

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